

DOCTORAL THESIS

Halofuginone modulates glucose metabolism and autophagy in colorectal cancer

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ABSTRACT

Cell metabolism disorder is considered as both direct and indirect consequence of oncogenic mutations for tumorigenesis. Autophagy is a metabolic stress response and a mechanism of natural cellular degradation. It is believed that autophagy, as well as metabolism, is a crucial process for the adaptation of cancer cells to changes in nutrient availability. Understanding the relationship between metabolism and autophagy and targeting on the key steps are regarded as a promising strategy to treat cancer.

Halofuginone (HF), a semisynthetic quinazolinone alkaloid originally derived from the plant *Dichroa febrifuga* Lour., has gained attention for its potential therapeutic effects in a variety of cancers. We hypothesize that HF may inhibit cancer cell proliferation by inducing changes in glucose metabolism and modulating related autophagy. A series of studies, from *in vitro* to *in vivo*, were designed to approve this concept in colorectal cancer (CRC).

Firstly, we found that HF inhibited human CRC cell proliferation and induced the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and apoptosis. As expected, a reduced level of NADPH was also observed, at least in part due to inactivation of glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) in pentose phosphate pathway (PPP) upon HF treatment. Given these findings, we further investigated metabolic regulation of HF through Akt/mTORC1-mediated aerobic glycolysis and found that HF downregulated the Akt/mTORC1 signaling pathway. Moreover, metabolomics found

slower rates in both glycolytic flux and glucose-derived tricarboxylic acid cycle flux. Meanwhile, both glucose transporter GLUT1 and hexokinase-2 in glycolysis were suppressed in CRC cells by HF. These findings support our notion that HF regulates the Akt/mTORC1 signaling pathway to dampen glucose uptake and glycolysis in CRC cells. Furthermore, HF retarded tumor growth in nude mice inoculated with HCT116 cells and reduced the viability of primary cells from the tissues of CRC patients. This finding further confirmed our hypothesis that HF inhibits CRC cell growth through metabolic regulation of Akt/mTORC1.

Because mTORC1 can inhibit autophagy through phosphorylation and inactivation of the initiating kinase ULK1 in cancer cells, we further studied the HF effects on CRC in different nutritional conditions. The results showed that HF in nutrient-rich conditions could reduce SQSTM1/p62 through mTORC1-mediated phosphorylation at Ser757 of ULK1. More interestingly, HF elevated SQSTM1 protein level in low nutrient condition through AMPK-mediated phosphorylation at Ser317/777 of ULK1. It showed that HF could regulate nutrient-sensing mTORC1-ULK1 or AMPK-ULK1 to dually modulate autophagy in CRC cells. Further study by using a variety of methods, including mRFP-GFP-LC3 puncta formation, transmission electron microscope (TEM) analysis and monodansylcadaverine (MDC) staining, found that HF could induce autophagosome formation and inhibit autophagosome membrane elongation, depending on nutrient-sensing pathways. Furthermore, we found HF pronouncedly enhanced expression level of *Atg7* under nutrient-rich conditions while it decreased *Atg7* in

CRC cells under nutrient-poor conditions. These two findings imply that *Atg7* is required in dual regulation of autophagic flux depending on nutrient conditions. This conclusion was then validated by comparing with autophagy-related proteins in *Atg7* knockout (KO) MEFs and Wild-type (WT) MEFs upon HF treatment. Importantly, through analysis of metabolome and metabolic enzymes, we found that HF inhibited glycolysis under nutrient-rich conditions while it inhibited gluconeogenesis under nutrient-poor conditions in an *Atg7*-dependent manner. In subsequent studies, we found that caloric restriction (CR) in a xenograft mouse model, which mimics low nutrition *in vitro*, enhanced the anticancer activity of HF. Further analysis of the expression of TQSM1 and LC3 in tumor tissues demonstrated that HF is an autophagic inducer in xenograft-bearing nude mice with *ad libitum* feeding, whereas it is an autophagic inhibitor when using CR.

In summary, this study explains how HF controls CRC cell growth through its influences on glucose metabolism and autophagy regulation. HF not only dually regulates autophagy *in vitro* and *in vivo* to inhibit cancer cell growth and proliferation through nutrient-sensing pathways under different conditions, but also modulates glycolysis/gluconeogenesis through an autophagic pathway. These results suggest that HF could turn out to be a potent therapeutic drug for treating CRC.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xiv
Chapter I General Introduction	1
1.1 Colorectal cancer.....	1
1.2 Cancer metabolism.....	3
1.3 PI3K/Akt/mTOR signaling pathway.....	9
1.4 Metabolomics application	12
1.5 Autophagy.....	16
1.6 Halofuginone.....	21
1.7 Research aim and design.....	23
Chapter II Halofuginone Inhibits Glucose Metabolism through Suppression of Akt/mTORC1 in Colorectal Cancer	25
2.1 Introduction.....	25
2.2 Materials and methods	26

2.2.1	Chemicals and reagents	26
2.2.2	Cell culture	27
2.2.3	MTT assay	27
2.2.4	Colony formation assay	27
2.2.5	Cell cycle analysis	28
2.2.6	Annexin V/PI dye staining	28
2.2.7	Western blot analysis	29
2.2.8	Quantitative analysis of mRNA levels	29
2.2.9	Measurement of cellular ROS levels	30
2.2.10	Measurement of [NADP ⁺]/[NADPH] Ratio	31
2.2.11	Xenograft studies	31
2.2.12	Immunohistochemical staining	32
2.2.13	Immunofluorescence staining	32
2.2.14	TUNEL assay	33
2.2.15	Primary cells from CRC patients	33
2.2.16	Cell culture for metabolic flux analysis	34
2.2.17	Metabolite extraction	34
2.2.18	UPLC-MS/MS analysis	35
2.2.19	GC/MS analysis	36

2.2.20	Cell culture for lipidomics analysis	36
2.2.21	UPLC/LTQ-Orbitrap MS for lipidomic analysis.....	37
2.2.22	Statistical analysis.....	38
2.3	Results	38
2.3.1	HF inhibits proliferation and induces cell cycle arrest in G1/G0 phase...	38
2.3.2	HF induces apoptosis, increases ROS and decreases NADPH levels	42
2.3.3	HF downregulates Akt/mTORC1 signaling pathway, slows glycolysis and inhibits lipid biosynthesis	49
2.3.4	HF retards tumor growth in xenograft-bearing nude mice	59
2.3.5	HF reduces primary CRC cell viability	64
2.4	Discussion	66
Chapter III	Halofuginone Regulates Nutrient-Sensing mTORC1/AMPK for Autophagic Flux and Glucose Metabolism in Colorectal Cancer	72
3.1	Introduction	72
3.2	Materials and Methods	73
3.2.1	Chemicals and reagents	73
3.2.2	Cell culture	74
3.2.3	GFP-LC3-II and mRFP-GFP-LC3 translocation and imaging in living cells.....	74
3.2.4	Staining of autophagic vacuoles by MDC.....	75

3.2.5	TEM imaging of autophagosome and autolysosome	75
3.2.6	Western blot analysis.....	76
3.2.7	Quantitative analysis of mRNA.....	76
3.2.8	Xenograft studies.....	77
3.2.9	Immunohistochemical staining.....	78
3.2.10	Immunofluorescence assay.....	79
3.2.11	Protein extraction from tumors for western blot analysis.....	79
3.2.12	Cell culture for metabolic flux analysis.....	79
3.2.13	Metabolite extraction.....	80
3.2.14	NMR analysis	80
3.2.15	Statistical analysis.....	81
3.3	Results.....	82
3.3.1	HF regulates autophagy through mTORC1/AMPK signaling pathway...	82
3.3.2	HF dually modulates early autophagosome formation.....	87
3.3.3	Atg7 is required in HF modulated autophagic flux	94
3.3.4	HF regulates glycolysis/gluconeogenesis in an Atg7-dependent manner	99
3.3.5	Caloric restriction potentiates efficiency of HF <i>in vivo</i>	103
3.4	Discussion	107
Chapter IV	Conclusion.....	112

4.1 Summary	112
4.2 Limitations	113
4.3 Perspectives for future development	114
REFERENCES	116
PUBLICATIONS	139
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS	140
PATENTS	141
CURRICULUM VITAE	142